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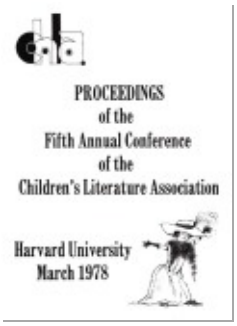

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Little Red Riding Hood Rides Again -- and Again and Again and Again

When I began teaching children's literature a few years ago, one of the things that most surprised me was the gulf between the books reviewers and critics discussed and the ones that were readily available to most children. I could find the books the experts recommended, in libraries or in the rare bookstore that had a reasonable assortment of children's titles. But meanwhile, every supermarket and toy department had its rack of Golden Books and Wonder Books and Tell-a-Tale Books and Pop-Up Books and Puppet Books. These were the books that gift-giving parents and grandmothers had the easiest access to; they were probably the only books that most children owned. Clearly a knowledge of these books was an important part of my education in children's literature; I decided to investigate them.

A glance at the racks showed me that the publishers of these series seemed to be very fond of "old favorites." Perhaps they understood that the grownups who purchase these books feel safe with the familiar; perhaps they simply realized that "old favorites" are out of copyright and fair game for anyone who wants to make a few bucks. In any case, they had published a disproportionate number of versions of the best known fairy tales. I decided to concentrate on "Little Red Riding Hood," simply because it seemed to be the one most popular title.

I found over thirty "Little Red Riding Hoods"; they are all different from each other, and they all offer surprising insights into our attitudes toward children and their literature. They are all based on two early versions -- Charles Perrault's "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," which was included in the first printed collection of fairy tales, the Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé of 1697, and the Grimm Brothers' Rotkappchen, included in Kinder- und Hausmarchen in 1812. But a look at these early versions shows that our ideas about what children ought to hear have changed greatly in the past few centuries.

Perrault's "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" was a "little country girl,"[1] and her troubles stemmed from her ignorance of the great world; she "did not know how dangerous a thing it is to stay and hear a Wolfe talk." In fact, the wolf's ability to talk her into what he wanted from her was just as dangerous as his great teeth were. And what he wanted was obvious; Perrault dwells on his heroine's beauty, and says that she is "the prettiest little creature that ever was seen." After that, it seems only natural that the wolf talk Little Red into undressing and coming into bed with him. And once into bed, she comments, not just on the interesting largeness of his eyes, ears, and teeth, but also of his arms and legs. While no other parts of the body are mentioned, it is surprising to realize that men who take advantage of innocent females were not called wolves until two centuries after Perrault told his story.

But the end of "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" is even more surprising. When

Little Red says, "Grandmama, what great teeth you have got!" the wolf answers, "'It is to eat thee up.' And upon saying these words, this wicked Wolfe fell upon the little Red Riding-Hood, and eat her up."

And that is all -- no helpful woodsman, no salvation in the nick of time. But Perrault did provide a moral:

> This story teaches that the very young
> And little girls, more surely than the rest --
> Sweet dainty things, clothed in their Sunday best --
> Should never trust a stranger's artful tongue.
> Small wonder if these guileless young beginners
> Provide the wolf with some of his best dinners. [2]

Apparently knowledge of the wicked ways of the world is essential, even for children. The spicy story of "le petit chaperon rouge" is a cynic's knowing comment on innocence: innocence is stupid.

We no longer believe that it is, and we work hard to protect the innocence of children, not only from wicked strangers, but also from stories in which children are devoured. It is not surprising that "Little Red Riding Hood" has changed so much since 1697.

In fact, the story had become much less frightening even by the time the Grimm Brothers collected their version of it from the nanny of some friends. "Little Red Cap" implies that children can make it safely through childhood, not by losing their guilelessness and arming themselves with knowledge of the wicked ways of the world, but by acknowledging the deficiencies of their innocence and trusting what their elders tell them about the world.

At the beginning of the story, Little Red Cap's mother tells her to "walk nicely and quietly, and do not run off the path."[3] But Red Cap foolishly trusts the wolf's advice over her mother's, and leaves the path when she accepts his suggestion to pick some flowers for her grandmother. Unlike Perrault's Little Red, who was given no instructions and consequently had no choice to make, Red Cap brings disaster on herself. Perrault's Little Red was too ignorant to avoid trouble; Red Cap chooses to act stupidly.

Furthermore, Red Cap is rescued. Even though the wolf does eat her, a huntsman happens by and saves her, not quite in the nick of time, but before any real damage has been done. It has taken a grownup to rescue a child from the inevitably bad results of too much self-confidence. And Red Cap makes it clear that she has learned her lesson; at the end she says, "As long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so."

That last phrase is particularly interesting; Red Cap did not learn to stick to the path -- she learned to obey. The specific instructions her mother gave her were quite secondary to the fact that she ignored them. The story confirms that by telling us why Mother asked Red Cap to stay on the path; it was not because she was afraid of wolves, but because Red Cap was bringing her grandmother some wine, and as Mother says, "You may fall and break the bottle, and then your grandmother will get nothing." Even though Red Cap does leave the path, the bottle does not break. But fortunately, the wolf happens along to confirm mother's right to dominate her daughter.

That domination seems to be necessary because, as the story makes clear, Red Cap cannot look after herself. The guileful children of the French

court who Perrault told his story to were obviously expected to laugh at the results of guilelessness, and to know how to look after themselves; but the more cossetted children who heard the story of Red Cap from their nanny were obviously thought to need protection from the terrors of the world outside their nurseries. While Perrault happily consigned dumb innocence to the wolf's stomach, the Grimms' nanny rescued it. Furthermore, Red Cap's salvation is accompanied by the destruction of the wolf; even though the story goes on to describe Red Cap's encounter with another wolf, we are finally told that "no-one ever did anything to harm her again." Children who hear this comforting statement are assured that things as terrifying as the wolf are extraordinary, and that the world they live in is really a safe place after all.

The story of Little Red had changed greatly between Perrault's cynical "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" and the Grimms' comforting "Rotkappchen"; it has continued to change ever since, and except for a few translations of the Grimm version with pictures by well-known illustrators,[4] none of the "Little Red Riding Hoods" I found is an accurate rendition of the traditional tale. Significantly, most of the changes are deletions, apparently engendered by a wish to make the story less frightening. As we get closer to the present, progressively less and less happens in it.

I could find only one version of those currently available that actually left Little Red unrescued at the end; and the storyteller who insists on the original ending is very defensive about it: "to alter the ending of 'Little Red Riding Hood' misrepresents Perrault, and makes nonsense of the moralité."[5] Apparently, though, it does not make nonsense of the moralité to misrepresent Perrault by keeping Little Red out of the wolf's bed. In this Puffin version she sits on top of the covers and keeps her clothes on, so it is hard to understand why she gets into so much trouble.

In any case, after the Grimms' nanny had rescued Little Red from death, the next step was to keep her from ever entering the wolf's stomach at all. According to Iona and Peter Opie, Little Red was first saved before the fact, at least in England, in the early 1840's. In Felix Summerley's version, "Little Red Ridinghood screamed as loudly as she could, 'and in rushed her father and some other faggot makers, who, seeing the wolf, killed him at once.'"[6]

In the more recent versions, Little Red is almost always rescued before the wolf can get his teeth into her; but even when she is eaten, she is quite callously unconcerned about it. In Beatrice Schenk de Regnier's rhymed version, her only comment after being rescued is, "Oh, it was smelly/ in there."[7] The Grimms' Red Cap was at least timid enough to comment on "how dark it was inside the wolf."

In fact, Little Red is frequently far more enterprising than her ingenuous forebears. She does sometimes still depend on mere chance for her salvation: "and she was a very lucky little girl, because it just so happened that a woodcutter was passing."[8] And sometimes her rescue still depends on the peculiarly outmoded feminine recourse to a loud scream. But in a number of versions Little Red does not hang around after the wolf tells her about his teeth. In the Make Your Own Pop-Up Book, for instance, "Little Red Riding Hood ran through the door, slamming it behind her, straight into the arms of the woodcutter."[9]

But while few Little Reds are devoured, many grandmothers are. A number of versions seem to work on the assumption that children "identify" with the children in the stories they read about, and that consequently, the eating of

themselves as embodied in Little Red would frighten them. On the other hand, the eating of a grownup, such as Grandmother, seems to be an acceptable form of entertainment.

But following the principle that less is safer, many of the more recent versions do not allow grandmother to be eaten either. In many versions, the wolf scares Grandmother, and then locks her in the closet. And sometimes even that doesn't happen. In My Big Book of Nursery Tales, Grandmother locks herself in the closet, and stays there, apparently too frightened (or perhaps too self-protective) to come to the assistance of her precious granddaughter;[10] in one astonishing instance she isn't even home when the wolf comes to call: "No one answered, for the grandmother wasn't very sick after all, and she had gone visiting."[11]

But unfortunately, the new-found self-confidence of Little Red and her grandmother is undercut by the obvious incompetence of the wolf. Not that he does not try to be frightening; the success of the story so much depends on the delicious horror of his conversation with Little Red that there is not a single version which does not report the wolf's statement about the uses of his teeth. But a number of versions try hard to deflect the horror of the wolf -- particularly by the ways in which their illustrations depict him.

Back in 1872, Gustave Dore quite happily showed Little Red in bed beside a wolf that looked like a wolf. Many of the contemporary wolves look like cute doggies and have loveable smiles. One of them resembles a Siamese cat;[12] another is a fuzzy, medium-blue bear with a checked sportcoat and a bowler.[13]

In fact, a number of wolves wear clothes, and particularly clothes that make them look more silly than terrifying. In the Modern Promotions version, the wolf's trousers are patched, and his bowler hat is a few sizes too small;[14] he obviously isn't a very successful wolf. Richard Scarry's wolf is also a little down at heels, and his jacket has patched elbows.[15] But this wolf's clothing does not do all that much to alleviate fear, because in Scarry's version, Little Red, and her mother, and her grandmother, are all cats -- and if cute pussycats wear clothes, then why shouldn't dangerous wolves?

In a Whitman Tell-a-Tale version, the wolf doesn't start off clothed, but he escapes at the end in one of Grandmother's silliest pink polka-dot nightgowns and a matching nightcap.[16] And in Disney's Fables and Fairy Tales,[17] we see the wolf hanging by a strap from a tree, wearing false wings, a frilly orange dress, high heels, and a yellow fright wig, and carrying a magic wand. Apparently he is trying to fool Little Red by pretending to be a fairy godmother. The text of this version is close to Grimm, and makes no mention of the wolf's transvestitism; but after those high heels it is hard to take him seriously.

Sometimes the wolf's incompetence is expressed as clumsiness; in one version, "he forgot to take off Grandmother's spectacles and he could hardly see";[18] in another, he "tried to climb over the rocking chair and then fell flat on his face";[19] in a third, "the nightcap fell over his eyes and he tripped over the shopping basket."[20] But the clumsiest wolf is the one in My Fairytale Cook Book: he

> was not used to wearing a dressing gown and he tripped over its long hem. He tried to untie the strings of the nightcap with his front paws, but his paws fumbled clumsily and he pulled it down over his eyes, dislodging the reading glasses, and making it impossible for him to see at all.

> Howling with rage, he tried to rush through the door. Instead he hit his head on the door post and knocked himself out. He fell in a heap on the floor.[21]

In the Make Your Own Pop-Up Book, the stupid wolf invents a ridiculously transparent excuse for his behavior: "Come in, Mr. Woodcutter, and you, dear Little Red Riding Hood. I am playing hide-and-seek with your grandmother." Not taken in, the woodcutter gives the wolf a sound beating with a broom. Nevertheless, the wolf does seem to still be alive at the end of the story, and a number of other wolves are too, even though they have been scared off Little Red's territory forever. Apparently our fear of violence is so strong that we want to avoid even the death of a villain like the wolf. I have not yet read a version in which the wolf says he is sorry and is forgiven; but I suspect the time is ripe for some enterprising publisher to put one out.

The most laundered version of "Little Red Riding Hood" is the Pop-Up version.[22] Little Red does not even have to put up with the minimal terror of a friendly meeting with the wolf: "the wolf was slinking through the undergrowth, watching her and thinking what a tasty meal she would make. When he realized where she was going [how is not explained], he ran off as fast as he could go, across the forest to Granny's cottage, bounded in the front door and chased poor Granny away." So nothing much happens to Granny. Nothing much happens to the wolf either; a forester named Tom Bowman hears Little Red scream and, of all things, wrestles the wolf to defeat. Bowman has a gun, but he does not use it. And "just when it seemed that Tom Bowman was getting the upper hand, the wolf took to his heels and ran out of the cottage, away through the forest and over the mountains to another land. He was never seen or heard of in Red Riding Hood's forest again."

Two of the four illustrations to this version show the happy ending, for the ending is all that really matters. The point of telling the story is to get rid of the wolf -- to purge the forest of terrifying elements. There has been danger; there have been things to be afraid of. But after the wolf has gone, there is nothing to be afraid of any more. The forester says, "May we always be as happy as we are now and may that wicked old wolf never come back to bother us again." The author adds, "The wolf never did." So of course we will always be as happy as we are now. This is literature as propaganda against terror. Its intention is to comfort children -- the exact antithesis of Perrault's attempt to scare children into being sensible.

In fact, the fostering of security seems to be the intention of all the more recent versions of the story. Here are some endings: "Then she set off with the hunter to walk back home through the woods. And there was no big bad wolf to watch them go."[23] "Little Red Riding Hood returned safely home to her mother and from that day on, the wolf never again returned to the forest."[24] "Red Riding Hood went to the cottage every day after that -- and there was no wolf to harm her."[25] The Cook Book version has an interesting variation of this idea. We are told that Little Red grew up to marry a huntsman, and as she puts her red cloak away for her own as yet unborn daughter, her husband says, "By that time, my love . . ., I'll see to it that there isn't one big bad wolf left in the whole of the forest." And, the author adds, "There wasn't."

None of these comforting versions provide a moral framework for the story. Mother gives no warning. Little Red breaks no rule, and there is nothing for her to learn at the end. But paradoxically, these versions depict an uncertain and uncomfortable world. Violence may never occur in

it, but the threat of violence is always there -- since the wolf just happened to come along, another one may just happen to come along again. Little Red has done nothing to deserve her punishment except be young and tender -- things she cannot help. Unfortunately, we seem to want children to believe that this uncertain world, in which malevolence occurs without justification and in spite of guiltlessness, is the world they actually live in.

Not surprisingly, the less protective versions that are currently available offer much more security. There is a framework of morality to depend on, a right way and a wrong way to behave. Evil comes only after a wrong choice has been made, and violence afflicts only those who have acted wrongly. The world is real, and the world is tough, but its toughness can be handled by those who live rightly.

But since that is true, a moral framework allows all the delicious horror anyone could ever want to indulge in. I suspect the version extant in Brittany in the nineteenth century was a very moral one; according to the Opies, "the wolf puts the grandmother's blood in bottles, and induces the unsuspecting heroine to drink her ancestress."[26] While modern versions are never quite as extravagant as that, the ones with a moral point are surprisingly gruesome. The wolves in them are vicious -- they have teeth, and they drip saliva.

In order to allow such delicious horror, these versions must make their morality obvious. In five versions, Mother is shown lifting a finger of warning for Little Red's benefit at the beginning.[27] After that finger goes up, there can be no doubt that the story which follows is going to teach us something.

But what, specifically, do these versions teach? Most of them pick up the idea from the Grimm version that Little Red's mistake was in leaving the path, and make it a much more obvious metaphor for doing the right thing. And most of them follow Grimm in suggesting that doing the right thing is doing whatever Mother tells you. The point is that Mother's rules, no matter how apparently pointless, are actually keeping the wolf from the door. In Disney's Fables and Fairy Tales, for instance, Little Red "was glad because her scary adventure had taught her a lesson. In fact she solemnly promised her mother never to disobey her again."

Some of the moral versions demand adherence to a very specific and very practical rule -- don't talk to strangers. In these dark times of ours, Little Red has almost returned to her origins in Perrault's spicy story, and has become an example of what happens to children who trust unknown males, with or without raincoats or automobiles. Ironically, even our moral versions of the story are evidence of our wish to protect children.

Furthermore, the mothers in a number of versions give both warnings -- but only the one about strangers is recalled at the end. In Three Favorite Fairy Tales, for instance, Little Red is told to "stay on the path, and don't talk to any strangers."[28] But at the end we are told only that she "never talked to any strangers in the wood" again. It is clear which of the two rules is thought to be more important.

On the other hand, some versions have morals that could not possibly have any application to the lives of real children; the presence of a moral seems to be more important than its relevance. In the Sandle Brothers version, Mother says, "don't talk to any wolves on your way to Grandma's . . . . There are lots of them about, and they're not very nice." And that turns out to be the point of the story: "Little Red Riding Hood knew it would be a long time before she told a wolf where she was going again."

In one of the Puppet books, Little Red reaches a similar conclusion: "you may be sure that never again did Little Red Riding Hood speak to a wolf in the woods!"[29] But at the beginning Mother had told her "not to speak to anyone she met on the way"; she said nothing about wolves. This Little Red has learned the subtle art of interpreting Mother's rules to suit one's own purposes; and she is allowed to get away with it.

Obviously these moral versions are just as strange in their way as the amoral ones are in theirs; either they flatten the meaning of the original story into a practical message about blind obedience, or else they imply by the sheer impracticality of their messages that any message at all will do, as long as the story seems to be teaching children something worthwhile. Finally, in fact, all the modern retellings of "Little Red Riding Hood" have the same failing; they were designed to satisfy, not children, but the prejudices of grownups about what children ought to hear. The amoral versions dilute the story by downplaying its theoretically fearful elements; the moral ones dilute it by implying half-truths, and sometimes untruths, about its meaning. And children must be content with the mere glimmerings of real delight that occasionally make their way through the fog of distortions.

Sometimes there are not even glimmerings. If the key to "Little Red Riding Hood" is delicious horror, and if the key to the horror is the suspense created by the questions Little Red asks the wolf and his answers to them, then what are we to make of this: "'Granny,' she said, surprised, 'what big ears, what big eyes, and what big teeth you have!' 'All the better to hear you with, see you with, and eat you with, my dear,' answered the wolf."[30] This is shorthand masquerading as literature. But then, what can you expect for 75¢?

Notes

[1] The first English translation of the Perrault story can be found in Iona and Peter Opie, ed., The Classic Fairy Tales (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[2] The Opies do not reprint the moral; it can be found in Margery Fisher, Intent Upon Reading (London: Brockhampton, 1964), p. 75.

[3] "Little Red Cap," The Complete Grimms' Fairy Tales, trans. Margaret Hunt, rev. James Stern (New York: Pantheon, 1944).

[4] These include Raymond Briggs and Tasha Tudor.

[5] Kathleen Lines, note to "The Little Red Riding Hood," illus. William Stobbs (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Puffin, 1975).

[6] The Classic Fairy Tales, p. 94.

[7] Illus. Edward Gorey (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

[8] Red Riding Hood and Other Stories, "retold" by Anthony Camden, illus. Rene Cloke (London: Sandle Brothers, n.d.).

[9] "Retold" by Christian Willcox, illus. Virginia Smith (Whitman) (Racine, Wisconsin: Western Publishing Co., 1973).

[10] Illus. Arthur Ranson (London: Award Publications, Ltd., n.d.).

[11] Bedtime Stories, illus. Tibor Gergely (New York: Golden Press, 1972).

[12] "Retold" by Mary Ratcliffe, illus. Cesare Colombi (Purton, Wilts.: Child's Play International Ltd., 1973).

[13] My Big Book of Nursery Tales.

[14] Illus. Warren Hawkinson (New York: Modern Promotions, n.d.).

[15] Richard Scarry's Animal Nursery Tales (New York: Golden Press, 1976).

[16] Illus. Mary Lou Dettmer (Whitman) (Racine: Western Publishing Co., 1972).

[17] Identified as Disney's Fables and Fairy Tales on the jacket, this book is actually Disney's Wonderful World of Knowledge: Stories, ed. Mario Gentilini (U.S.A.: The Danbury Press, 1973).

[18] Illus. June Goldsborough (Whitman) (Racine: Western Publishing Co., 1964).

[19] "Retold" by Jane Carruth, illus. Elisabeth and Gerry Emberton (Hamlyn Fairy Tales in Colour) (London: Hamlyn, 1973).

[20] Make Your Own Pop-Up Book.

[21] R.C. Scriven, My Fairytale Cook Book, illus. Andrew Skilleter (Great Britain: Peter Lowe, 1974).

[22] (My Favorite Pop-Up Book) (New York: Modern Promotions, n.d.).

[23] Jane Carruth, The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales (London: Hamlyn, 1975).

[24] Modern Promotions.

[25] My Big Book of Nursery Tales.

[26] The Classic Fairy Tales, p. 94.

[27] Child's Play International, Make Your Own Pop-Up Book, a Brimax edition, one of the Grosset and Dunlap "Puppet" books, and the Golden Press Three Favorite Fairy Tales.

[28] Illus. Torchio (New York: Golden Press, 1964).

[29] Illus. T. Izawa and S. Hijikata (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1967).

[30] Modern Promotions.

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